



Academic Career Mobility: Career Advancement, Transnational Mobility and Gender Equity

Petra Angervall¹ · Björn Hammarfelt²

© International Association of Universities 2023

Abstract

This study explores how policy discourses on academic career are articulated in Swedish higher education. Discourses on academic career are often expressing meritocracy and the necessity of competition, but also include demands for flexibility and global participation. Recent decades of higher education policy have also stressed the importance of gender equity, which is particularly evident in the Nordic countries. Yet, how these discourses interact and impact on contemporary ideas on academic career remains unclear. We analyse a selection of Swedish government bills to explore present policy discourses on academic career mobility, and how these discourses express and create tensions for different staff groups. The findings shows that the notion, and promotion of career mobility in Swedish higher education features tensions between career advancement, transnational mobility and work life stability. It is also clear that some scholars are defined as more career mobile and successful than others. Hence, discourses on career mobility tend to give legitimacy to already existing work divisions and hierarchies partly undermining gender equity. In conclusion, our findings show tensions and contradictions in these policies, which give base for further nuanced and critical discussions on the current conditions and possibilities in Swedish higher education and academic career.

Keywords Higher education · Policy discourse · Academic career · Transnational mobility · Gender equity

✉ Petra Angervall
Petra.angervall@hb.se

Björn Hammarfelt
bjorn.hammarfelt@hb.se

¹ Department of Educational Work, University of Borås, Borås, Sweden

² Swedish School of Library and Information Science (SSLIS), University of Borås, Borås, Sweden

Introduction

Academic career advancement is often described in terms of a vertical movement in line with the meritocratic university system, but it can also be experienced as an individual journey that signifies new possibilities and freedom. In recent years, several studies point to new challenges in academic career, and that an academic career trajectory is a bumpy road with unclear opportunities for tenure, lack of resources, and stability (Henningsson, 2023; Angervall and Beach, 2017; Ryan, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to examine policy discourses on academic career in a selection of Swedish higher education bills and reports to understand the challenges and tensions embedded regarding career mobility, and how these challenges relate to transnational mobility and gender equity initiatives. The latter questions specifically aim to highlight how power relationships are intertwined with discourses on academic career.

The study departs in the understanding that academic career involve constant movement and change, both intellectual and physical, and that specific actions are needed for advancement. For us, academic career trajectories always include more allowances and opportunities for some than others, or, in other words, that some people have rights to claim certain paths, space or resources over others (Bauder, 2020; Gregg, 2016). Consequently, power dimensions are always embedded in career trajectories, just as values, resources and space affect institutional and individual choices and opportunities. This is highlighted in a recent study by Doerr (2022) in which it is exemplified how women tend to be overlooked, overworked or even sanctioned in academic career advancement. Indeed, studies illustrate how gender equity policies tend to run in parallel with other, sometimes rivalling, goals in academia. Keisu's et al. (2015) research describes how ambitions regarding excellence and competitiveness in career are kept apart and "intact" from gender mainstreaming practices, which result in different conditions and possibilities in academic career.

In recent decades, a large number of studies demonstrate how discourses on transnational mobility in academic career, in terms of international movement, pathways, and interests, are changing. Morley et al. (2018) discuss how globalisation has affected academic career and how discourses on internationalisation easily create otherness and differentiation. A similar argument is raised by Uhly et al. (2017) who use the concept glass fences to illustrate gender barriers between men and women and how they affect their possibilities and participation in research collaborations in different ways. Similarly, Whitchurch et al. (2021) argue that academic career is changing because of how parameters of career are being increasingly stretched in order to accommodate new forms of academic tasks and tracks. These tasks create new divisions of work and cooperation with other sectors (Kehm and Teichler, 2014). Gregg (2016) reminds us that academic tasks and tracks always include contradictions in the sense that movements of one individual usually involve the halting of another: "valuable lives attract investment to move with agility, comfort and ease while others are left to lag, accumulate weight, and ossify" (p. 114).

A slightly different angle on these work divisions is presented by de Graaf (2020). She shows how academic teachers guard the quality of teaching against pressures from career demands (publishing successfully) and cutbacks. A similar point is raised by Copeland (2022) in “Stop describing academic teaching as a ‘load’”. He argues that the discourses used to describe academic teaching are part of creating the value divisions between teaching and research. Few would question that teaching is a central part of the scholarly work we do in academe. However, teaching tends to be valued less than research in career advancement (Levander, 2017), which creates not only a value division between work tasks, but also between different staff groups.

Overall, it is evident how women risk losing opportunities for the kind of career mobility that is rewarded in comparison with men (Nikunen and Lempiäinen, 2020). Similarly, it has been documented that scholars who are expected to stay “in place” and care for students risk becoming locked into particular evaluative practices (de Graaf, 2020; Guarino and Borden, 2017), which in turn creates specific career possibilities related to prevailing gender structures (Angervall et al., 2015). Scholars who are not “locked in” but instead use or challenge trajectories considered valuable are either offered funding opportunities and advancement (Van den Besselaar and Sandström, 2017) or risk becoming lost in places “in-between” or are even advised to leave. Such risks are evident for those who are moving or in transitions. The “wandering postdoc” is a common description of young scholars who fail to find a permanent home. Moreover, while mobility is heralded in the research policy discourse, it is not always an advantage in terms of attaining stable and prestigious positions in academia. Seeber et al. (2023) show that transnational mobility, as well as possessing a foreign nationality, reduced the chances of promotion, and these effects were particularly evident for younger researchers. These findings accentuate the need for questioning the idea that specific forms of career mobility is crucial for building a successful academic career.

In the study, we use the concept of academic career mobility foremost to pin down and describe physical movements in career, through which we gain new experiences and wider insights (Horta, 2013). A mobile researchers, however, do not necessarily move transnationally, even though international experiences most certainly is vital for new insights (Bauder, 2020). For some, academic career mobility mostly concern vertical movements, in accordance with the university meritocracy. These movements can take place inside an institution or between institutions (also globally). For others, academic career mobility is about finding a job or moving horizontally between what the system tend to regard as less valued work tasks.

Consequently, we argue that policy and social practice is affecting how we understand academic work, and the governmentality of academic career mobility (Morrissey, 2013). As, for example, Whitchurch et al. (2021) points out policy can create new dimensions of time and place and how it affects career trajectories: “parameters of a career were being stretched” (p. 644), which has created a higher degree of control and workload, but also a sense of flexibility. Davies and Bansel (2010) discuss the implications of the governmentality embedded in the current practices of the university: “Academics are persuaded to teach the same way, complete the same forms, make applications to the same funding bodies, make links with industry—in

short to reproduce the same practices in order to re/organise themselves to fit the template of best practice” (p. 7). Similar thoughts are raised by Davids and Van Eerdewijk (2016) who discuss the governmentality of gender mainstreaming initiatives. For them, gender mainstreaming initiatives are often used to signal that something specific can be fixed or applied to all kinds of organisations (Davids and Van Eerdewijk, 2016). Thus, contemporary policy systems and governmentality disregard contextual factors and power relations, which creates gender divisions. This is partly echoed by Melby et al. (2008) who point to that gender mainstreaming initiatives sometimes create counter effects, such as increasing gender division in employment. Alnebratt and Rönblom (2016) show how the Swedish government’s initiation of gender mainstreaming in higher education was transformed slowly from a political and general concern to a local or even individual responsibility.

Before presenting our analysis, we introduce the Swedish context in which this study is situated. Thereafter follows a section that discusses contemporary changes in the higher education structure and policy more generally as well as a description of methods and material. The article concludes by summarising and discussing some key insight on ambiguous understandings of career mobility in Swedish policy on higher education.

Gender and Careers in Swedish Higher Education

National reports in Sweden show that women have less opportunities for leading and participating in research in comparison with men (SHEA, 2021). Recent research points to behavioural and structural factors that underlie the scientific output of academics, possibly leading to what Van den Besselaar and Sandström (2017) refer to as a “waste of talent”. Van den Besselaar and Sandström’s (2017) research connect the lower production rate of papers among female academics with the overrepresentation of women in lower-status positions, the general lack of or limited access to research funds, the absence of prestigious collaborative networks and the lack of access to research environments. Nikunen and Lempiäinen (2020) argue that understanding the career tracks of academics must include analysing life experiences, family situations and investments in career (see Donskis, 2019; Uhly et al., 2017). They also show how the reference frames of the potentially added value as a result of career movements (physically) differ between cultural contexts, where, for instance, being a parent whilst managing a career in academia is viewed as problematic only for the female academics (Nikunen and Lempiäinen, 2020).

Related to such concerns are studies showing that gender differences in terms of productivity may be the consequence of advantages given to men early in their academic career. For example, male PhD students are more often co-authoring with their supervisors, which gives them and advantage in terms of output and impact. Moreover, they tend to have a larger collaborative network early in their career (Lindahl, et al., 2021). While generally small early on these differences in the early career increases over time, this give men an cumulative advantage over women when competing for positions and resources.

In Swedish higher education, the gendered division of academic research and teaching in terms of career is obvious: men tend to engage in research activities, whereas women tend to focus on teaching duties (Angervall and Beach, 2017). This picture is complex as some choose to engage in teaching, or service areas, with less opportunities for promotion, in comparison with others who are offered more rewarding pathways. What is clear, according to a number of studies, is that on average women faculty perform more service—what is sometimes called “academic housekeeping”—than male faculty and that these differences are driven particularly by participation in internal rather than external service (Guarino and Borden, 2017; Peterson and Jordansson, 2022). Moreover, Angervall and Beach (2017) highlight that women’s anxiety—whether self-inflicted or as a result of work conditions and caretaking responsibilities—adds to constant tensions based on an unequal gender division, leaving women less productive.

A characteristic feature of Swedish academia is the large degree to which research is financed through competitive funding. In practice, this system grant researchers a high degree of independence in relation to their employing institutions *if* they are fortunate enough to attract external funds. As research funds are necessary for a successful academic career, this means that important decisions for individual researchers are often made by colleagues, or rather by a scientific elite represented in evaluation panels, instead of being made by head of departments or similar. Consequently, inequalities in terms of access to resources cannot solely be addressed on the local institutional level, but it also involves structural decisions on a national level. Still, researchers depend on local management structures to accrue necessary merits. These merits include, for instance, the supervision of PhD students, which is an important step in the process of gaining professorship.

Hence, the high degree of external funding has consequences for the division of labour within departments where external funds tend to be concentrated to a limited number of academics. In practice, this often results in further divisions of tasks within departments where some mainly do teaching while others focus on research. Such divisions tend to be reinforced over time as substantial research time (e.g. external funds) is often a prerequisite for receiving additional funding. The so called “Matthew effect”, which means that those that already have resources and reputation will extend their advantage (Merton, 1968), will thus widen the difference even further.¹ Importantly, this division has a gendered dimension as women more often than men take on tasks related to teaching and lower-level administration. In general, men more often than women, hold research positions that include funds for research (Angervall and Beach, 2017).

Another important factor to consider when analysing the career structure in Swedish higher education is the relatively low degree of movement from university to university among staff members. It is not uncommon that scholars stay in the same department from PhD education to professorship (Henningson and Geschwind, 2021). Furthermore, academic field differences are of significance when studying

¹ Later, the term “Matilda effect” was coined to describe the observation that women systematically get less credit than men (Rossiter, 1993).

career structures. For more internationally oriented fields—such as biomedicine—national structures and rules may make less of a difference due to a “global job market” compared to more local and nationally oriented fields. Moreover, the availability of external and internal funds for research differs between basic research (more funding) fields and applied fields (less funding). Coincidentally applied fields have a larger portion of women in the workforce (SHEA, 2021). A similar pattern can be observed between universities where the larger, research-intensive universities take the lion share of the total budget for research.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Our understanding of policy emanate from policy network theory (Ball, 2010, 2016). From this, we decided to use a policy ethnographic approach to track how policy move, is negotiated, transformed, articulated, borrowed and make reference to different contexts (Lewis, 2021). We also relate to Dubois (2015), who highlights how policy ethnography enables “challenging mainstream positivist approaches to public policy; confronting common sense and official views on policy” (p. 478).

The study departs in a general understanding of policy as social practice (Ball, 2010). From this departure, policy is seen as ensembles of ideas and categorisations that are produced and transformed into a particular set of practices, through which meaning is given to physical and social realities (Ball, 2010). Hence, policy is not only emanating from governments but is a way to accomplish governance through specific forms of ruling. These forms of ruling also include and signify certain power relationships, interests and values (Ball, 2010, 2021; Melby et al., 2008).

In more recent years of policy research, it is argued for the necessity of understanding policy as practices part of and emanating from network systems and the fluidity of these systems (Lewis, 2021). Here, policy is seen as tightly connected to the global market (Ball, 2010, 2016), and to new materialities, ideas, and political players (e.g. agents of government or stake holders) who define what is described as more flexible and boundaryless interrelations between institutions and actors (Lewis, 2021). From policy network theory, policy has, on the one hand, become a more general, objective marker of institutions or individual positioning (Duberley et al., 2006; Whitchurch et al., 2021). On the other hand, policy is also seen as an adaptable tool for new “objective” standards and practices. From this end, policy appear to emphasise more flat, flexible and including practices, yet at the same time controlling and effective (Ball, 2010; Lewis, 2021).

Policy is studied through the analysis of a selection of national policy texts that particularly concern academic career trajectories and gender equity in Swedish higher education. These texts, altogether eight, target issues of academic trajectories from three different government institutions: The National Board of Higher Education, The Swedish Higher Education Authority (SHEA) and The National Government Bill (Gb). Out of these eight texts we selected six, of which all are national, governmental directives, and that particularly highlight contemporary necessities of *career structures, advancement, career options, resources/merits, and issues of gender equity* in Swedish higher education. Four of these texts are Government Bills

(Gb, 2016/17:50; Gb, 2020/21: 60; Gb, 2018:78, Gb, 2016:29) and two are annual reports from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (SHEA, 2019, 2021). Two of these eight policy texts were, accordingly, left out on basis of content. In our reading we found them more directed towards issues of general internationalisation strategies and student affairs and not fully including issues of particular importance for this study: Academic career structures and trajectories, and gender equity issues.

These texts have been used (read, re-read and analysed) to understand how national government policy directives articulate ideas, where these ideas come from, how they are transformed into examples of social practices in these texts and for whom. Through these transformations, we have been able to track and highlight examples of career mobility and how discursive objects and power asymmetries change (Ball, 2016). Thus, we focused on identifying discourses being articulated again and again, we have looked for tensions, similarities and how some of the discourse are intertwined and connected to people, places and goals. In this, we have used keywords to support our analysis: career paths/trajectories, collaborations, merits, change, goals, gender, transitions, exchange, success, advancement etc. In summary, we have a) independently read and analysed the selected policy texts and b) brought our analysis together to substantiate and compare our interpretations. The final analysis is presented below my means of themes. These themes are empirically based and part of our results. The quotations used have been translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

Career Mobility in Swedish Higher Education Policy

The following sections outline the analysis of the selected sources. We start by describing the background depicted in these documents and how career mobility is outlined. In the following sections we include an analysis on how discourses of career mobility is connected to discourses on transnational mobility and gender equity.

How to Become a Mobile Academic

It is clear that many academic departments struggle with finding the time and the resources for promoting career mobility. The analysed bills convey the impression that it is difficult for smaller university colleges to offer positions that include stable conditions, research funding and opportunities to advance. In this respect, the great reliance on external funding becomes problematic as it often only offers individuals to move and advance, which in turn may hinder universities and departments to act on local inequalities in the distribution of support for mobility in career development (Van den Besselaar and Sandström, 2017). The availability of recourses and permanent positions varies between different disciplinary areas. In the bill “Knowledge, Freedom and Future” (2020), it is described how career mobility:

... differ between sectors and subject areas, where transitions between staff from academia and other sectors in society are common in medicine and the

natural sciences, while more prevalent for staff in the humanities and social sciences. Moreover, and in general, it is more likely that professors move, at least transnationally, in comparison with more junior researchers. (p. 119-120).

Within some disciplinary sectors, career mobility is very much integrated with the surrounding society and its demands for qualified staff, whereas in other sectors, careers are dependent on the resources of the “home university”. The SHEA report (2021) describes how fields such as engineering and medicine receive more funding than the social sciences and the humanities. However, it is also mentioned how research in these fields may be more costly in terms of equipment and other resources which suggests that a comparison might not provide a full picture. In the report it is stated:

Career positions are more common in the natural sciences, medicine and engineering, with 16, 15 and 15 percent employment rates, respectively. Of all the merit tracks within the university, 79 percent of these were identified as being within specific research areas. (p. 88).

When comparing these observations with the numbers of adjunct teachers in the humanities and social sciences, where adjunct teachers is the second largest group of staff, differences between forms of career trajectories in diverse disciplinary sectors become understandable. Adjunct positions are also by numbers clearly dominated by women (SHEA, 2021), which may indicate that the humanities and social sciences have more teaching work, educational programs and students than the other sectors. It also indicates that there is less teachers with a doctoral degree within these disciplinary sectors. In the bill from 2020 it says:

Generally, the degree of mobility is low among professors and lecturers especially if it concerns transitions between academic institutions and departments and other sectors in society. The staff category that is not involved in teaching or research and lack a doctoral degree is actually more mobile “locally” than other academic staff. This kind of mobility is higher in the humanities, arts and social sciences than in other sectors. Employed professors are more mobile when it comes to parallel employment at several academic institutions. (p. 119-20).

Several points are highlighted here. One is that discourses on career mobility can divide staff groups and become signifiers for a specific career trajectory and its value in an organisation. Another is that local career mobility tend to differ a great deal from transnational mobility. It seems as if career mobility closer to the academic’s home only concern, or is articulated in relation to, specific groups (admin, lab assistants and adjunct teachers).

The SHEA’s report from 2021 shows that staff transitions between national universities are more common in the humanities, arts and social sciences. This is possibly due to the fact that these areas are granted less opportunities for external research funding in comparison to engineering, science or medicine, which in turn affects employment possibilities. The humanities, arts and social sciences are dominated by women in terms of staff numbers. Another important finding is that even

though those who tend to move the least between universities in Sweden are male professors (Gb, 2016b), this is not the case when it comes to transnational mobility, where male professors tend to move the most (Statistics Sweden, 2021). One reason for this may be that some staff groups (for example early careers with young children) are in more need of stability than, for example, professors, which could encourage local movements and not the kind of mobility that gives research merits. In the bill “Knowledge through Collaboration” (2016a), it says:

More specifically, increased mobility is discussed as necessary for improving and maintaining the quality of research. For this purpose, it is important that young researchers gain insights from abroad and build networks that extend to research environments outside Sweden. (p. 25).

Moreover, in bills from (2016b) and (2020), it is highlighted that staff transitions, both locally and internationally, have an impact on the quality and competitiveness of academic work. Thus, one of the bill (2016b) suggests:

(that) more competition of being granted a permanent lecturer position also promotes gender equality, mobility between institutions, departments and the surrounding society. Furthermore, this kind of mobility creates better research groups and milieus and a more dynamic and pluralistic culture for researchers. This will support the welfare of society and its competence development for future needs. (p. 74).

Here, career mobility is transformed into a solution to almost all of the problems of contemporary academia; it promotes gender equity, it creates better relations to surrounding society, and it contributes to dynamic and pluralistic environments while also improving the quality of research. Mobility is literally the “Swiss-army knife”, applicable to any major challenge facing Swedish research and higher education. Indeed, the adaptable use of “mobility” in Swedish academic policy discourse aligns very well with policy discourses that emphasises flexibility, and its adaptability may in turn increase its ability to effectively control practice (Ball, 2010). Furthermore, this mobility discourse is strongly connected to values which we generally perceive as important in modern societies (see Appadurai, 2012)—like action, agency and progress—which strengthens its usability in policymaking.

The Global Competition for Academic Reputation

A recurring and central proposition in this sample of directives is that Swedish academia needs to become more flexible and adapted to what is called “the global setting”. In the bill from 2018 “Increased Reputation for Increased Knowledge in Sweden”, it is stated that Swedish higher education needs to become more recognised globally:

(how) long term relationships between international partners will result in other developments, for example in merchandise, corporate industries and in the development of welfare and prosperity. Good international collaboration

also gives the Swedish higher education system good knowledge about internal strengths... (p. 110).

It is repeatedly stated that the higher education sector in Sweden represents high-quality research from an international perspective. However, it is also stated, in the bills from (2016a, 2016b) and (2020), backed up by statistics, that other nations are catching up, and due to this “threat”, Swedish higher education needs to speed up and create a more competitive system that will secure Sweden as a strong knowledge nation worldwide. This more competitive system is articulated as something new, which also entails a new understanding of career mobility.

In the same bills, concrete advice is given to ensure that Swedish higher education institutions and staff understand how they best can navigate forward. For example, academics need to, in their lines of career, collaborate more with international partners by using exchange programs. An overarching argument is that increasing transnational mobility will enhance the quality of research and contribute to more effective dissemination of knowledge. In addition, this increase in mobility will also eliminate the risk of higher education losing its reputation of high quality (Gb, 2016b).

These general policy discourses emphasises specific career mobility, and by using terms like “risks”, “losing ground”, “falling behind”, it is also indicated that time is running and that some institutions or academics are not up to standards. Through this, we are reminded of how closely related higher education policy is to other stakeholders, the global market, and the industry or welfare interests (Ball, 1997). It is implied that academic institutions and work needs to incorporate an increasing number of areas or interests, (Whitchurch et al., 2021), and that policy is a call for increasing the national achievements and for more societal flexibility. Hence, in the bill from 2020, it is described as follows:

The government is now stressing that international mobility for academic teachers and researchers need to increase and that mobility is seen as particularly important in recruitment criteria and career advancement. [...]. The Government emphasises, in line with previous reports on research career in Sweden, that special tenure tracks need to become more competitive nationally, but also internationally. (p. 73).

Interestingly, competition and transnational mobility is positioned as pivotal for solving questions regarding both fairness and quality. Hence, the 2020 bill follows the ethos—as expressed already in the bill of 2016—in which increased competition is described to solve many of the problems, associated with academic career structures. From this, we learn that this policy discourse remains rather intact over time, even if the 2020 bill was introduced by a left-wing government as opposed to the right-wing bill of 2016.

To summarise, transnational career mobility is recognised in these bills as a central strategy for creating a stronger higher education system in Sweden. However, at least two main and to some extent colliding policy discourses are embedded in this strategy: on the one hand, the idea that the academic system needs to become more internationally competitive and recognised and, on the other hand, emphasise on

the necessity of creating academic practices as more including and flexible. These discourses signify a complexity, where institutions and researchers are expected to act in accordance with particular policy demands (becoming more competitive), even though claims of flexibility, pluralism and movement (participation, inclusion, equity) are also highlighted.

Gender Equity and Career

Gender equity is a recurrent theme in the government bills analysed in this study and is often referred to in the overall descriptions of the academic system, in recruitment issues, in calls for funding and funding schemes, in relation to permanent academic positions and in relation to different career strategies. Particularly important is the government's ambition to increase the ratio of women in relation to men in leading roles, since men, although in minority in the sector overall, still occupy the most prestigious positions (Statistics Sweden, 2021; SHEA, 2021). Likewise, gender divisions on an institutional micro-level, such as in daily work tasks, subject areas, and in time and management, are discussed. In the bill from 2020, we can read that:

It is of the utmost importance that universities and other actors, for instance research financiers, strive toward equal opportunities for men and women in terms of establishing careers and merits, both within doctoral programs and later on as postdocs. In addition to ensuring the gender diversity in various university programs and permanent employment positions, it is important to secure the qualitative preconditions to establish a university career, for instance in terms of combining career opportunities with family life. (p. 21).

Here, it is made clear that policy discourses on gender equity address all parts and levels of academic institutions and career. Moreover, it is argued that universities need block funding as a base for creating local opportunities for making change in terms of gender equity. For example, the bill (2016a) marks out an important relationship between research funding and gender equity:

With an increase in research funding, the prerequisites for gender equality will increase, and universities will be able to, more than before, take responsibility for divisions in academic work, in teaching and research between different groups of staff. (p. 23).

This indicates the opposite of what Alnebratt and Rönblom (2016) claim to be a move from gender mainstreaming initiatives through political governance to individual responsibility. Instead, the bill includes directives to institutions on how they can accomplish gender equity by implementing offers of shared research funding or more including recruitment strategies. However, the connection between increased funding and gender equity is not made explicit, and the question, what would motivate universities to use funding to promote gender equity, remains. Instead, we see a policy transformation that is justifying a lack of direction (Ball, 2010). In specific, it appears to be justified to only give vague policy recommendations of how to use research funds to support gender mainstreaming initiatives, in a system where

research is articulated as autonomous, neutral, merit-driven and highly rewarding (Keisu et al., 2015). Consequently, for some policy issues (gender equity) it is politically justified if they adapt or change, in comparison with other issues (career advancement). This is an example of how incompatible policies may be stretched and transformed into partly different or new ideas and practices (Lewis, 2021).

In the bill from (2016b), it is argued that the career paths presented for early career academics today tend to be too narrow, which in turn can affect strivings for gender equity:

The career paths offered for young scholars today to reach a permanent position as a lecturer are often unclear. In a recent proposition concerning academic career development, it is highlighted how uncertain career paths risk affecting the possibilities for young scholars to establish international contacts, move internationally, and through this uncertainty in career reduce the interest of the next generation for research work. Also, there is a lack of permanent positions that attract women and their interest in an academic career. Women tend to reach for stability in their careers more than men. (p. 73).

The lack of clear career opportunities for young scholars is discussed as a risk for coming generations of researchers. It is argued that if young academics lose interest in an academic career, it will affect the whole society in a negative way. This is especially so if career opportunities that lead to permanent positions are few, a situation that tends to affect women more so than men. However, the need for more stable positions is discussed in parallel with recognising that more temporary positions is/are also required in an well-function system (2016a, 2016b, 2020 bills).

Even though policies on career mobility tend to emphasise the necessity for transnational mobility, several bills highlight the importance of national staff transitions between academic institutions. Still, increased career mobility is rarely seen as conflicting with other values such as stability, good working conditions or gender equity (Morley et al., 2018), even though not always aligned; rather, the established notions of “mobility” have been identified as a problematic factor when trying to reduce gender disparities in academia.

Concluding Discussion

The aim of this study has been to investigate discourses on academic career mobility in a selection of national higher education policies by especially scrutinising what come across as challenges related to expectations of transnational mobility and gender equity. We have used policy network theory, which emphasise an understanding of policy discourses as both stabilising and in constant change, but also ideas on how these policy directives signifies power, stakeholders and different pathways in academic career (Ball, 1997, 2010).

Our findings show that the policy discourses we investigate partly describe institutional and disciplinary differences in terms of what is emphasised in academic career mobility. In general, most of the highlighted discourses are repeated as “neutral” directives, and described as general, important, and necessary. For example,

the successful trajectory in academic career is often depicted as a universal standard pathway for advancement, which also include the specific actions taken, such as forms of advancements and merits. Often, success is conceptualised as aligned with transnational mobility in terms of exchange work experiences, networks or guest visitors. However, how to combine international mobility with heavy workloads or a lack of institutional resources is not discussed, nor how it relates to gender equity. One can assume that international collaborations in academic career easily present extra burdens for academics who have children living at home (Uhly et al., 2017).

From this, we draw the conclusion that policy discourses on successful career mobility implies a specific academic context, certain resources and space which in turn risk to exclude particular disciplinary fields and departmental contexts, but also family arrangements (Horta, 2013; Doerr, 2022). These discourses also tend to justify certain gender mainstreaming initiatives that are adaptable to circumstances (e.g. career advancement) that may be seen as more important (Ball, 2010). In at least two of the bills (2016a; SHEA, 2021), it is also stated that there is a need for more stable positions in Swedish higher education. Especially young scholars are highlighted as in need for stability, and it is argued that stable work positions create better conditions while at the same time attract more vulnerable groups (e.g. women) to stay in higher education. In this claim, we see a complexity in what becomes academic mobility, where stable positions are viewed as supporting foremost women, which may indicate that some groups need stability in career, whereas other groups are expected to act more mobile. One could argue that this governmentality aims at defining career mobility as performativity (Morley et al., 2018).

As Henningson (2023), we see tensions between academic institution's need for results, increased flexibility and individual's needs for clarity, predictability and long-term perspectives. These tensions are present in all of these bills. It is emphasised that Swedish higher education institutions need to offer long-term stable career pathways in order to attract a broad group of academic staff. The need for stability in career is highlighted as important for gender equity, and in this context, women are particularly addressed. It is also argued that more temporary positions in academic career would secure research merits, and give ground to more mobile careers. In analysing this division, it becomes clear how short-term contracts, in comparison with more stable alternatives, lack directions to a particular academic staff group. Short-term contracts are presented as a complement to stable pathways, as if this would be a justified circumstance.

Hence, what becomes evident is that the kind of career mobility emphasised in these bills mostly concern research merits and advancement, often through transnational collaboration, while more national and local mobility is not incentivised or discussed in similar terms. Interestingly, the first type of mobility—for research purposes—is to a larger degree performed by male professors, while female adjuncts are those moving more locally, and often due to teaching (Angervall and Beach, 2017).

In conclusion, our results show how academic career mobility in Swedish higher education is highly intertwined with three dominant policy discourses: The “advanced” academic career mobility which is formed by expectations of meritocracy and competition; a more “flexible” career mobility, including high levels of

change, movements and global participation; and the “including and horizontal” career mobility in which also gender equity is emphasised. In all, these discourses illustrate how mobility in academic career has become a kind of “Swiss army knife” to solve both research excellence, increased flexibility and movement, and stable work conditions for so called vulnerable staff groups. This, in turn, illustrate how career mobility is integrated with power divisions that form tracks for specific groups (related to e.g. gender, age, ethnicity) in academia (Heijstra et al., 2017). This could also explain why women academics “are significantly less likely than men to engage in international research collaborations” (Uhly et al., 2017, 773).

The government’s push for increasing both national and transnational mobility in higher education neglects the fact that academic staff in Swedish higher education dwell in different academic landscapes, with distinctive recourses and conditions. Still, or maybe just because its indiscriminatory use, mobility has become a multipurpose tool for solving key challenges in Swedish academia. This study, however, shows that the notion, and promotion of career mobility features tensions and challenges which becomes visible when analysing policy directives. We hope that in making these tensions visible we may be able to discuss, and ultimate implement, mobility in a more nuanced and critical manner. This, we argue, becomes especially important when relating the current career mobility discourse to initiatives that promotes gender equality in higher education and research.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest

References

- Angervall, P., and Beach, D. (2017). ‘Dividing academic work: gender and academic career at Swedish universities’. *Gender and Education*, 32(3): 347–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2017.1401047>
- Angervall, P., Beach, D., and Gustafsson, J. (2015). ‘The unacknowledged value of female academic labour power for male research careers’. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 34(5): 815–827. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1011092>
- Alnebratt, K. and Rönblom, M. (2016) *Feminism som byråkrati: jämställdhetsintegrering som strategi*. (Feminism as bureaucracy: gender mainstreaming as strategy), Stockholm: Leopard.
- Appadurai, A., et al. (2012) ‘Thinking beyond trajectorism’, in M. Heinlein (ed.) *Futures of Modernity. Challenges for Cosmopolitical Thought and Practice* Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, pp. 25–32.
- Ball, S. (1997) ‘Markets, equity and values in education’, in R. Pring and G. Walfords (eds.) *Affirming the Comprehensive Ideal*, Routledge, pp. 69–82.
- Ball, S. (2010) ‘Global education, heterarchies, and hybrid organisations’, in K.-H. Mok (ed.) *The Search for New Governance of Higher Education in Asia*, Springer, pp. 13–27.
- Ball, S. (2016) ‘Following policy: Networks, network ethnography and education policy mobilities’. *Journal of Education Policy* 31(5): 549–566. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2015.1122232>
- Bauder, H. (2020) ‘International mobility and social capital in the academic field’. *Minerva* 58: 367–387. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11024-020-09401-w>
- Copeland, P. (2022) ‘Stop describing academic teaching as a load’. *Nature Career Column*. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00145-z>.

- Davids, T. and Eerdewijk, A.V. (2016) 'The smothering of feminist knowledge: gender mainstreaming articulated through neoliberal governmentalities', in M. Bustelo (ed.) *The Politics of Feminist Knowledge Transfer. Gender Training and Gender Expertise*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 80–96.
- Davies, B. and Bansel, P. (2010) 'Governmentality and academic work: shaping the hearts and minds of academic workers'. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 26(3): 5–20
- de Graaf, G. (2020) 'Value conflicts in academic teaching'. *Teaching Public Administration* 39(1): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0144739420937755>
- Doerr, K. (2022) "Flying under the radar": postfeminism and teaching in academic science. *Gender, Work and Organization*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12922>
- Donskis, L. (2019) *Academia in Crisis: Dystopic Optimism and Postalgic Realism in University Life*, Leiden: Brill-Rodopi
- Duberley, J., Mallon, M. and Cohen, L. (2006) 'Exploring career transitions: accounting for structure and agency'. *Personnel Review* 35(3): 281–296
- Dubois, V., et al. (2015) 'Critical policy ethnography', in F. Fischer (ed.) *Handbook of Critical Policy Studies*, Cheltenham-Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 462–480.
- Gregg, M. (2016) 'The athleticism of accomplishment: speed in the workplace', in J. Wajcman and N. Dodd (eds.) *The Sociology of Speed Digital, Organizational, and Social Temporalities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 102–114.
- Guarino, C. and Borden, V. (2017) Faculty service loads and gender: Are women taking care of the academic family? *Research in Higher Education* 58: 672–694
- Government Bill. (2020) *Research, freedom and future—knowledge and innovation for Sweden*. (Forskning, frihet, framtid—kunskap och innovation för Sverige), Prop. 2020/21:60, Stockholm.
- Government Bill. (2016a) *Knowledge through collaboration—for societal challenges and competition* (Kunskap i samverkan—för samhällets utmaningar och stärkt konkurrenskraft), Prop. 2016a/17:50, Stockholm.
- Government Bill. (2016b) *Stability and attractiveness—A research career for the future*. (Trygghet och attraktivitet—En forskarkarriär för framtiden). Prop. 2016b:29, Stockholm.
- Government Bill. (2018) *Increased reputation for increased knowledge in Sweden* (Ökad attraktionskraft för kunskapsnationen Sverige). Prop. 2018:78, Stockholm.
- Henningsson, M. (2023) 'Organising the academic career: Organisational inconsistencies as problems and solutions'. PhD dissertation. KTH Royal Institute of Technology. <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kth:diva-325975>.
- Henningsson, M. and Geschwind, L. (2021) 'Recruitment of academic staff: an institutional logics perspective'. *Higher Education Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12367>
- Heijstra, T.M., Steinhorsdóttir, F.S. and Einarsdóttir, T. (2017) 'Academic career making and the double-edged role of academic housework'. *Gender and Education* 29(6): 764–780. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1171825>
- Horta, H. (2013) 'Deepening our understanding of academic inbreeding effects on research information exchange and scientific output: new insights for academic based research'. *Higher Education* 65: 487–510. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9559-7>
- Kehm, B.M. and Teichler, U. (2014) *Higher Education Studies in a Global Environment*, Verlag Winfried Jenior.
- Keisu, B., Abrahamsson, L. and Rönnblom, M. (2015) 'Entrepreneurship and gender equality in academia: a complex combination in practice'. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* 5(1): 69–92
- Levander, S. (2017) 'Den pedagogiska skickligheten och akademins väktare: Kollegial bedömning vid rekrytering av universitetslärare'. (Educational proficiency and the gatekeepers of Academia. Peer review in the recruitment of university teachers). PhD Dissertation. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Uppsala.
- Lewis, S. (2021) 'The turn towards policy mobilities and the theoretical-methodological implications for policy sociology'. *Critical Studies in Education* 62(3): 322–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2020.1808499>
- Lindahl, J., Colliander, C. and Danell, R. (2021) 'The importance of collaboration and supervisor behaviour for gender differences in doctoral student performance and early career development'. *Studies in Higher Education* 46(12): 2808–2831
- Merton, R.K. (1968) 'The Matthew effect in science: the reward and communication systems of science are considered'. *Science* 159(3810): 56–63
- Morrissey, J. (2013) 'Governing the academic subject: foucault, governmentality and the performing university'. *Oxford Review of Education* 39(6): 797–810

- Melby, K., Ravn, A.-B. and CarlssonWetterberg, C. (2008) *Gender Equality and Welfare Politics in Scandinavia the Limits of Political Ambition?*, Bristol: Policy.
- Morley, L., Alexiadou, N., Garaz, S., González-Monteagudo, J. and Taba, M. (2018) 'Internationalisation and migrant academics: the hidden narratives of mobility'. *Higher Education* 76(3): 537–554
- National board of higher education (UHR). (2018) *Annual report on staff and recruitment*. U2018/00382/UH, Stockholm.
- Nikunen, M. and Lempiäinen, K. (2020) 'Gendered strategies of mobility and academic career'. *Gender and Education* 32(4): 554–571
- Peterson, H. and Jordansson, B. (2022) 'Managing and leading gender equality change in academia', in C.S. Sarrico, M.J. Rosa and T. Carvalho (eds.) *Research Handbook on Academic Careers and Managing Academics*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 165–174.
- Rossiter, M.W. (1993) 'The Matthew Matilda effect in science'. *Social Studies of Science* 23(2): 325–341
- Ryan, S. (2012) 'Academic zombies. A failure of resistance or a means of survival?' *Australian Universities Review* 54(2): 3–11
- Seeber, M., Debacker, N., Meoli, M. and Vandeveld, K. (2023) 'Exploring the effects of mobility and foreign nationality on internal career progression in universities'. *Higher Education* 85: 1041–1081. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00878-w>
- Swedish Higher Education Authority (SHEA). (2019) *Annual report on the higher education sector* (Swe: UKÄ). Stockholm.
- Swedish Higher Education Authority (SHEA). (2021) *Annual report on the higher education sector* (Swe: UKÄ). Stockholm.
- Statistics. (2021) *Statistics Sweden: Overview of Staff and International Mobility*, Stockholm: SCB.
- Uhly, K.M., Visser, L.M. and Zippel, K.S. (2017) 'Gendered patterns in international research collaborations in academia'. *Studies in Higher Education* 42(4): 760–782. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1072151>
- Van den Besselaar, P. and Sandström, U. (2017) 'Vicious circles of gender bias, lower positions, and lower performance: gender differences in scholarly productivity and impact'. *PLoS ONE* 12(8): e0183301. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0183301>
- Whitchurch, C., Locke, W. and Marini, G. (2021) 'Challenging career models in higher education: the influence of internal career scripts and the rise of the "concertina" career'. *High Education* 82: 635–650. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00724-5>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.